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Pentagon in dispute with CIA over new Soviet missiles

From ADAM RAPHAEL, Washington, May 26

A dispute between the Central Intelligence Agency and the Pentagon over the interpretation of the 60 new missile silos in the Soviet Union has led to a reassessment of Russia's strategic intentions at a crucial stage in the SALT negotiations.

The new silos pinpointed by satellite reconnaissance were originally described by the Defence Secretary, Mr Laird, on March 10, in alarmist terms as possible evidence of a new generation of massive offensive missiles superseding the Russian blockbuster SS9 missile.

The CIA, however, has now briefed independent arms control experts that at least two thirds of the large silos are designed to give increased protection to the relatively small SS11, equivalent to America's Minuteman-3 strategic missile.

Questioned about the disparity today, the Defence Department appeared to be backing away from the Pentagon's original assessment. The department's spokesman said information gathered within the past month gave some indication that the Soviet Union might be involved in two separate systems of silo improvement. "Our best judgment remains that we would expect to see new missiles or improvements on existing missiles," he said.

The CIA's assessment of the new silo construction is that the Soviet Union, like the US, is engaged in a programme of hardening silos to protect them against the threat of a first

strike attack posed by the Minuteman-3 missiles with their new MIRV warheads. The size of the hole is explained by the need to insert concrete liners around the missile to give greater protection.

A conclusive piece of evidence is reported by intelligence analysts to have been received early last week when reconnaissance satellite pictures showed silo liners arriving at the missile sites. The photographs were also said to have indicated that the liners at neither type of site were big enough to accommodate larger missiles and those at the SS9 sites did not appear to be intended for weapons of improved design.

If the CIA's intelligence is correct the new Russian missile threat posed by the Pentagon and the hawks in unison is a chimera. The threat first received a public airing on March 7 when Senator Henry Jackson (Democrat, Washington) told a television interviewer, "The Russians are now in the process of deploying a new generation, an advance generation, of offensive systems."

Three days later in a television interview, Mr Laird said that the silo construction "confirmed the fact that the Soviet

Union is going forward with construction of a large missile system. We cannot tell at this time whether it is a modified version of the SS9... or whether it is an entirely new missile system."

A month later in a speech to the American Newspaper Publishers' Association, Mr Laird said the US had fresh intelligence "confirming the sobering fact that the Soviet Union is involved in a new, and apparently expensive, ICBM construction programme."

The net effect of the missile scare was neatly summed up in evidence yesterday to the Senate appropriations committee by a former CIA and disarmament agency official, Dr Herbert Scoville, chairman of the strategic weapons committee of the Federation of American Scientists, said that it as now seemed likely the Soviet Union was only hardening its missile sites, this would indicate that it was not seeking a first strike capability. "We must ask ourselves," he told the committee, "how many times we are going to allow the weaponizers to come before the Congress and the people shouting 'missile gap' when in reality they are only creating another credibility gap."